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ABSTRACT

Curriculum innovations at the University of Illinois (Chicago Circle) in the second-year level of German instruction are indications of the current trend toward greater individualization of instruction. The German department offers second-year students options to the traditional program which include the regular skills program, an enriched and intensified honors course, special study in the development of reading skills, and two second-year conversation classes for the last quarter of any of these three sequences. Concluding remarks concern enrollment, mobility, and scheduling problems encountered at the university. (RL)

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SECOND-YEAR OPTIONS

For the past few years, there has been no issue more critical in our profession than the need to re-assess and redefine our foreign language programs. At the University of Illinois at Chicago Circle, as elsewhere, we have been listening to student requests and demands with intense interest, and thus far we have managed to retain the foreign language requirement. In order to give our subject more appeal, the German Department has introduced a system of diversification at the intermediate level that is tailored to fit the needs of as great a variety of students as possible within our budgetary limitations. This paper, which is intended as a practical aid for departments contemplating the introduction of a similar system, will present some of the major aspects, problems, and results of the program.*

After the students have been introduced to the four skills during their first year of German study, they are given an opportunity in the second year either to continue our regular four-skills program, to take an enriched and intensified honors course, or to elect a course of special study in the development of reading skills. In addition, those who are particularly interested in speaking German may substitute two second-year conversation classes for the last quarter of any of these three sequences.

The regular sequence continues our first-year program of furthering the ability to speak and write simple German, to comprehend the spoken language, and to read both for general content and specific detail. In the second year of the four-skills program, we have put heavier emphasis on the reading of literature than was customary in the audio-lingual age, using one book primarily for extensive coverage of text and another for close reading analysis and as a speaking model. Most of our students have elected to remain in this "track."

*I am greatly indebted to Hazel C. Vardamann for major ideas and impetus behind this program and for invaluable guidance during its implementation.

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The honors track, which we have in the first as well as in the second year, parallels the regular four-skills sequence, with additional literary texts for comprehension and interpretation. The course carries five hours of credit instead of the usual four, and since the classes are considerably smaller, a good deal more attention can be devoted to individual students. It is provided for, but not limited to, those who are considering a future German major or minor. Enrollment in this sequence has doubled since it was introduced two years ago, and many of the students come from other fields such as the sciences. It is taught by some of our most experienced teachers.

The students enjoy the stimulation of an honors group brought together by special interest in the language, and to further this interest, there are mimeographed handouts on contrastive linguistics, how to learn languages, the history of language and literature, and the role of language in philosophy and the social sciences. For good students at this level, knowledge about language and culture motivates better than anything else we have tried, but we attempt to cover it in handouts and taped lectures so that class time may be devoted to the four skills. During the course of the quarter, students are tested on the basic and supplementary reading material, but not on the handouts. As a policy procedure based on experience, we give the honors track the same final examination as the regular four-skills track, which uses the same basic texts. The scores of the honors group are not included when we set up the final curve, but their final examination grades are determined on the basis of the curve which we establish for the regular track. This procedure dispels the fears expressed by students that in switching from the regular to the honors track, they may get lower grades, and it thus serves as an incentive for them to join the honors group, which they may do at any level.

There was some fear that the exodus of top students into the honors course would involve a lowering of standards in the regular sequence, since a lowering of motivation might well be expected with the "cream" of the class removed.

We have found, however, that a number of "good" students have remained in the regular track, some of them because of scheduling problems. These students continue to help provide for class stimulation and incentive, and some even seem to have profited from lack of heavy competition. Moreover, the present concentration on the "average" student in the regular course appears to have proven beneficial to him and to the class as a whole.

The reading track was introduced for a special group of students who wished to complete the second year of compulsory language study with a course that did not require them to speak or write the language. Thus in this particular sequence we were unable to use many excellent ideas on the teaching of reading based on the "active approach." On the other hand, even though the old translation "taboo" of oral-aural days has been lifted, we still did not wish to re-institute the old-fashioned translation course. Translation is therefore limited to idiomatic expressions, special sentence elements involving recurring structural problems, and selected key words pointed out in context. Another major problem was that those authors which appear to be most appealing to students at this level (Hesse, Dürrenmatt, Kafka) are readily available in translation and in many cases have already been read with great interest by students on their own or in connection with other classes. We have coped with this problem by designing the examinations to assure that students have covered the material in German and understand the meaning of the German text.

Our classroom approach has varied from teacher to teacher, but we have attempted some degree of uniformity in objectives for the sake of the students. Reading material differs from quarter to quarter, but we have generally presented one literary or cultural unit as the basic reading element of each course (for example, a novel and short stories by Hesse supplemented by other fiction and non-fiction readings, a long novel by Dürrenmatt supplemented by newspaper readings, or a general cultural reader supplemented by modern

short stories). This approach does have its disadvantages as well as its obvious advantages. As was expected, students attained a high level of confidence reading a lengthy work by one relatively easy author (Hesse or Dürrenmatt), but then were confounded when confronted with another writer (Brecht or Thomas Mann). There is no easy way to make the transition, but it does stimulate interest for the teacher to do a great deal of reading ahead in class in the works of a new and more difficult author, pausing for explanations, questions, and guidance in guessing techniques.

In general, we have attempted to introduce as much variety as possible into the reading-track class procedures. A sample class would include a few general questions and answers on content in English, spot translation as outlined above, word study, vocabulary building, sight reading, and some literary analysis on an elementary level (comparison of characters, elements of symbolism, obvious contrasts in the style of two authors), as well as general discussions in which students are encouraged to express their ideas on the cultural significance of the assigned material. As the year progressed, it was possible to make a slow transition from basic skill orientation at the outset to heavier subject orientation in the third quarter, and to include some individualized reading depending on the size of the classes and on the needs and inclinations of the students.

Our original plan called for an additional option system within the reading track itself. After the first quarter, which emphasized general development of skills in reading modern German prose, the student was provided with a choice of classes specializing in fiction or general cultural readings. For the third quarter, an option was planned for classes in fiction, culture, or scientific German. However, enrollment in the reading sequence was not sufficient to allow us to follow through with this program. During the first year, for instance, only seven students chose non-fiction readings, and only one student opted for a course in scientific German. Present reductions in our budget and staff simply do not allow for such a highly refined system of individualized instruction, and we have therefore merged the various reading tracks to provide a variety of material for all students in the sequence.

In conclusion, I would like to share some of our general experience on enrollment, mobility, and scheduling. Last year, in the first quarter of second-year German, we had 78% of the students in the regular course, 11% in honors, and 11% in reading. In the second quarter of the sequence, 77% were in the regular course, 13% in honors, and 10% in reading. In the third quarter, there were 79% in the regular, 12% in honors, and 9% in the reading course.

Our greatest difficulty with the option tracks is in scheduling. Most students simply do not wish to build their entire program around a German reading sequence with only a section or two offered. If one has to drop out of the reading track because of schedule conflict or employment considerations, it may involve considerable extra effort to re-enter the four-skills course. In the honors track, we have been able to allow for more mobility. Since the same basic classroom approach and the same basic textbooks are used in the regular four-skills and the honors course, students are encouraged to enter the honors track with the knowledge that they may easily switch back to the regular sequence at any time, even during the course of the quarter if desired. Yet we have found that very few students return to the regular track once they have joined the honors group. The provision for inter-track mobility is thus a special incentive for entering the honors sequence and one of the reasons for its success.

It will take a great deal of further experimentation and painstaking evaluation before the results of the program can be accurately gauged. During the year of implementation, enrollment in the reading course was not as high as we had anticipated on the basis of student demands, and student reading proficiency as tested at the end of the reading course was not significantly higher than that of the four-skills course. At this early stage, our one visible reward for offering the reading option has been the sustained interest of the students in the course. But the splendid accomplishments of the honors students, whose achievements have surpassed our expectations, have already demonstrated clearly that it is indeed worthwhile to give heed to new voices and to move with the times.

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